





# Fisheries Overview 2006

By Greg Power

The weather – you don't go a day without hearing about or discussing it. Is it going to rain or snow? How warm or cool will it be today? These are all common questions asked daily and the answers are always varied. One day it may be 100 degrees Fahrenheit and three days later there may be frost on the pumpkin.

To live on the Northern Plains is to experience the wide range in weather and all its unpredictability. The land and waterscape of North Dakota are predicated on past and current weather patterns. Most of the state's economy, especially agriculture, is driven by the weather. Our choice of daily attire is determined by what it's going to be like outside. Due to our extreme dependence on weather, names of the state's weather personalities are better known to some North Dakotans than their elected lawmakers.

Another issue close to the hearts of most North Dakotans is their outdoor pursuits, and fishing continues to top the list. Last year, more than 160,000 adults bought a North Dakota fishing license. From Bowman to Pembina, from Crosby to Wahpeton, North Dakotans relish the opportunity to go fishing. And there probably isn't any recreational activity that depends more on weather than fishing. We are constantly scheduling and rescheduling fishing trips based on assumptions of forecasters.

We've become accustomed to trips to our favorite fishing hole during ideal conditions, only to face gale force winds and driving rain moments after wetting a line. Other times, we stay home due to unfavorable weather forecasts, only to kick ourselves later because we picked weeds in the garden on an absolutely perfect day. Even avid anglers, with their high-tech boats and associated amenities, are reduced to onlookers from the safety of a pickup cab when a North Dakota thunderstorm rolls in.

But we've adapted. Though we may not like it, we understand that living with our weather is the price we often pay for the chance to experience wonderful fishing. While the weather not only influences daily decisions to fish, it's the driving force behind why we have such productive fisheries.

For example, during the drought of 1988-1992, the number of fishable waters in North Dakota dwindled to around 100. However, following unprecedented wet conditions from 1993 to the early 2000s, the number of fishing lakes grew to near 350. Sloughs and meadows were flooded, creating new northern pike and yellow perch fisheries. Seemingly overnight, duck marshes became 20-foot deep lakes, covering thousands of acres.

Forecasting what fishing will be like in 2006 is similar to predicting the weather. Even so, there are still some things to share. Although many lakes across the state don't need more water, that's not the case for large portions of southwestern and south central North Dakota. There is a real need for some late winter snow and significant runoff in these areas. On the upside, it appears we'll get through winter with little or no significant winterkill.

Most lakes should be in good shape, and though fish populations may be down a bit in some waters – especially compared to historic highs of the early 2000s – good numbers of walleye, pike, perch, crappie, bass and other species can be found across the state.

With the exception of Lake Oahe, which has essentially dried up due to drought and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers water management policies, the big fisheries in North Dakota are also in respectable shape. Good to very good walleye and pike populations await anglers in Lake Sakakawea and Devils Lake, and the white bass populations are still relatively strong in Devils Lake.

Although the weather is the driving force in determining fish populations and fishing opportunities, fish management efforts assist in improving fishing during periods of drought and extending the highs during times of good fishing. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department's fisheries division structure is sound. From field crews working on fish surveys, to boat ramp crews, to fish haulers, to staff working on lake rehabilitation projects, the fisheries division has a strong framework addressing angler access, fisheries management and fish production needs of the state.

North Dakotans are lucky to have such dedicated professionals to make things better for the state's anglers. The Department's small staff of fisheries biologists and technicians is first rate, and always willing to work extra hours if called upon – no matter the weather.

In many regards, North Dakotans are fortunate for such diverse weather as it has led to diverse habitat and diverse fishing opportunities. From paddlefish snagging on the Yellowstone River, to trout fly-fishing in Turtle River State Park, to catfishing on the Red River, to walleye fishing on the big waters of Sakakawea and Devils Lake, to darkhouse spearfishing for northern pike on one of three dozen lakes scattered across the state, to panfishing in a small local pond ... North Dakota truly offers it all. So next time you go fishing, in addition to participating in one of our favorite pastimes of cursing the weather, take some time and thank the driving rain, insistent wind, or biting cold – for ultimately, weather is responsible for the yank at the end of your fishing line.

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**GREG POWER** is the Game and Fish Department's fisheries chief.

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*North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel Phil Miller, left, Randy Hiltner and Justen Barstad, netting fish during spawning efforts at Devils Lake.*